

Understanding main ideas

6

WHAT?

Understanding the main ideas means seeing through all the detailed ideas on the page to understand what the writer is really getting at. It's seeing how the 'bits and pieces' fit together.

It is like looking at a photograph made up of thousands of black, grey and white dots, and being able to work out what the subject of the photograph is.

It also involves being able to distinguish the main ideas from the details which support them.

HOW?

To understand the main ideas in non-fiction you need to:

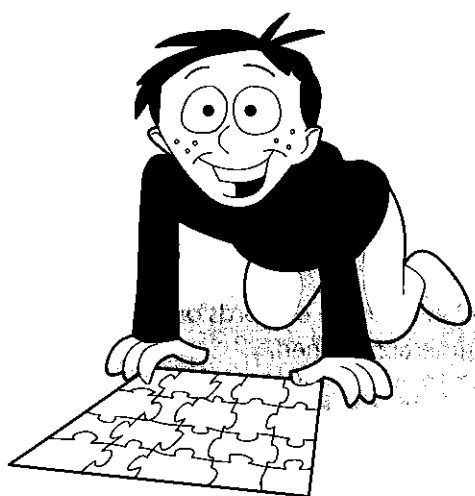
- see each sentence as part of a larger whole. Don't focus only on the meaning of the sentence you are reading.
- pay attention to the text introduction. It will often tell you the main idea of the whole text.
- pay attention to topic sentences (usually, the first sentences of the paragraphs). These should state the main ideas of the paragraphs.
- think about how general or how specific statements are. *Soccer requires great skill* is a very general statement. *The best soccer players are very fast* is a more specific one. *Harry Kewell is one of the fastest soccer players the world has seen* is even more specific.
- take notice of linking words — words like *however*, *for example*, *as a result*, *in contrast* and so on. Also take notice of words that refer back to something in the previous sentence, e.g. *this*, *the*, *those*.
- ask yourself if you really understand what the writer is getting at. If you don't, read the text again.

In fiction — novels, short stories and poems for example — you have to work harder to get the writer's point. It won't be clearly stated in an introduction or perhaps anywhere in the text at all. Also, novels and short stories very often use paragraphs with no clear topic sentences. Poetry makes no use of topic sentences at all — the writer uses other techniques to get the main ideas across.

WHY?

The only time that understanding the main ideas is *not* so important is when you scan for a specific bit of information. Otherwise, it is an important part of *all* the reading that you do.

There are a number of activities in Part Two which give you practice in understanding main ideas.



PRACTICE

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The activities below will make you more aware of what you need to pay attention to in understanding the main ideas of a text.

- 1** Finding the most general statement in a paragraph is often the key to understanding the main idea. Number these simple statements from the most general (1) to the most specific (4).

Example

- i 2 We eat ice-cream at least three times a week.
 - ii 4 My father hides the ice-cream at the back of the freezer so that we won't find it.
 - iii 3 My father is an absolute ice-cream addict.
 - iv 1 Everyone in my family loves ice-cream.
- a i Your skin is waterproof.
 - ii Your skin is an all-purpose covering.
 - iii Your insides need to be kept moist so that they don't stop working.
 - iv Skin keeps water out, and more importantly, it keeps water in.
- b i Our faces are windows into our thoughts and feelings.
 - ii Something in our faces signals whether, for example, we are lying or not.
 - iii The psychologist travelled the world looking at faces in all kinds of culture.
 - iv One US psychologist set out to discover the rules that govern how we interpret facial expressions.

- 2** Sequencing tasks help to make you aware of how sentences link together to express a main idea. Sequence the sentences below so that they form one whole paragraph. Use the words in *italics* to help you. The first two have been done for you.

- a 2 *This* is not surprising given that when we are frightened or upset our heart starts thumping.
- b *Today we know* that the heart is just a muscular pump for the blood.
- c *But* the belief turned out to be wrong.
- d 1 *In the past*, people used to think that the heart controlled the whole body including feelings and emotions.
- e *What is more*, we know that the whole body is controlled by this amazing organ.
- f *This* old belief gave rise to phrases like 'I know it in my heart'.
- g *We know* that the heart is in fact controlled by the brain.

- 3** Sequence these sentences below in the same way. Again take notice of the words in *italics*. The first one has been done for you.

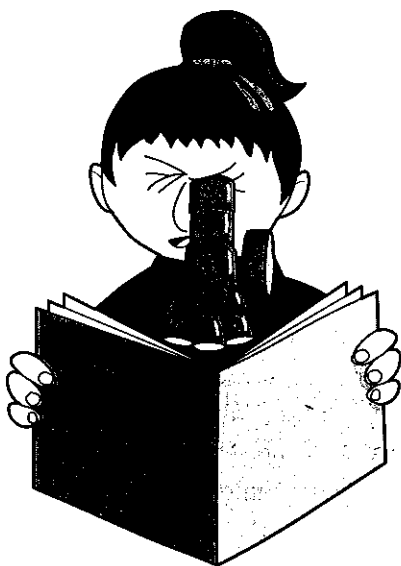
- a *Two in three, for example*, would talk to their mothers about failing exams whereas one in three would talk to their fathers.
- b 1 *A recent study* of Australian youth has some good news for mothers around the country.
- c *And more than half* would tell mum if they were worried about something while only one-quarter would tell dad.

Understanding detail

WHAT?

Understanding the detail means understanding the 'bits and pieces' in a text. It means looking beyond the main idea and taking notice of all the smaller facts and ideas that support that idea.

HOW?



To understand the detail, you need to

- take time to fully understand every sentence. Don't skip a sentence because it looks too long and complicated.
- take notice of words that link ideas across sentences, e.g. in *contrast*, *although*, *moreover*, *nevertheless*.
- take notice of words such as *the*, *this*, *these*, *those*, *such*, *the other*. They also link ideas across sentences.
- try guessing the meanings of new words. If you can't, and the word looks really important, use your dictionary or ask someone what it means.
- read back over parts of the text that you did not understand the first time.

Of course, most of us *do* skip over at least *some* detail at least *some* of the time.

Still, it is easy to be caught out. How many times have you skipped some detail, then realised later that you *did* need it and had to go back and search for it before going on?

WHY?

Understanding detail is not always important but you do need to know when it *is* important and then make sure you pay attention to it when reading.

In fiction, understanding detail can be most important because the main idea might not be directly stated. You have to put all the details together and work out what this main idea is.

In this book, there are many tasks which require you to understand the detail. Always check your answers and then read back over the text if your answers are wrong.

PRACTICE

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These activities will raise your awareness of the skills needed to understand detail.

- 1** Read the text below and answer the questions about the parts in *italics*.

The ancient Egyptians believed that it was important to record and communicate information about religion and government. *Thus*, they invented written records that could be used to record *this information*. The most famous of all ancient Egyptian scripts is hieroglyphic. However, throughout 3,000 years of ancient Egyptian civilisation, at least *three other scripts* were used for different purposes. Using these scripts, scribes were able to preserve the beliefs, history and ideas of ancient Egypt in temple and tomb walls and on papyrus scrolls. Today *their work* provides us with a wonderful window into the past.

- a What is another word you could use for *thus* in the text? _____
- b What is *this information*? _____
- c '... at least *three other scripts* were used for different purposes.' Three other scripts besides what?

- d 'Today *their work* provides us with ...' Whose work? _____

- 2** Now do the same for this text.

Records of writing provide valuable insights into ancient ways of life, but archeologists have to distinguish carefully between what are true records and *what are not*. While records of accounts and trading details may generally be accurate, records of historical events or the actions of rulers *may not be*. One indication of *this* is that records of battles that rulers have lost are very rarely found.

- a '... have to distinguish carefully between what are true records and *what are not*.' Not what?

- b '... records of historical events or the actions of rulers *may not be*.' May not be what?

- c 'One indication of *this* ...' Indication of what? _____

Understanding complex sentences

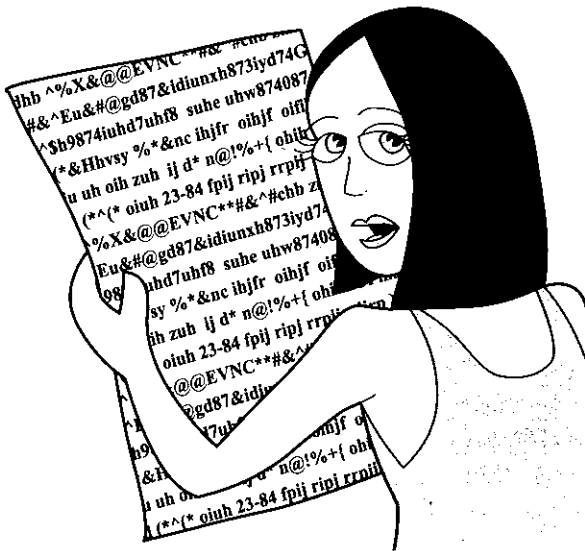
WHAT?

Often you will have no difficulty in understanding the sentences in a text. But even the most experienced reader will sometimes stumble over more **complex sentences**.

Sentences might be complex

- because they are very long
- because they consist of many parts
- because they contain many facts and ideas, or
- because of a combination of these factors.

HOW?



To understand complex sentences, you need to:

- take your time and read slowly. Read the difficult sentences twice, three times or as many times as you need to.
- read the difficult parts out loud. This often helps to make things clearer.
- work out the essential parts of the sentence. Work out what the subject of the sentence is (i.e. what or who the sentence is about), and the main verb (what that person or thing did).
- break up the sentences into smaller chunks of meaning.
- identify the main clause (the one that makes sense by itself) where there is more than one.
- don't skip sentences because they look long and complicated.

WHY?

Complex sentences occur in all kinds of writing. They are particularly common in information texts and in some kinds of newspaper articles.

While many texts written for school students are written quite simply, you'll often have to read texts written for an adult audience when you're researching an assignment topic. These texts will certainly include complex sentences.

In Part Two, there are many activities which require you to understand complex sentences in order to answer the questions.

PRACTICE

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These activities will raise your awareness of the skills needed to understand complex sentences.

- 1** In these sentences underline the main **clause** — the clause that makes sense by itself. The clauses have been separated with '/'. Following are three examples.

You can listen to radio / while doing other things.

When an event is actually occurring, / people usually turn on the radio first for information.

Radio is more accessible / because it is easier to find one and turn it on.

- a** Radio can report on events / as they are happening.
- b** Because radio journalists need very little equipment, / radio can often be first with the news.
- c** Radio can abandon all its other programs / to concentrate on an important story / and to provide a community service.
- d** In bushfire disasters, radio informs people about the location of fires, / as well as running appeals / to collect clothing and food for people affected.
- e** Now that talkback radio is so popular, / almost every radio station in the country incorporates a talkback segment / to give listeners a chance to have their say.

- 2** In these sentences underline the noun which is the subject of the verb (in italics). Following are three examples.

Theme music usually *introduces* a news program.

The newsreader *reads* the introduction and *passes* the story to a reporter.

A participant in the event being reported *might tell* what happened or *offer* an opinion.

- a** News programs on most major TV channels *try* to cover news of national and international interest as well as local issues.
- b** Some news programs, especially those on commercial channels, *can appear* to be more interested in entertainment than information.
- c** Stories about lost kittens, cute children or unusual human behaviour *should not be allowed* to dominate news programs.
- d** A good example of the importance of conflict to news stories *was* a recent item about a student protest.
- e** The competition between television channels to film the best pictures *is* intense.
- f** Most news programs, even those that regularly broadcast violent drama series, *will not show* film with victims of accidents, murders or wars.

- 3** Break these sentences into small chunks of meaning (about five or six words). Note: there is more than one way to do this.

e.g. Expensive publicity campaigns are run / which aim to convince people / that the news on one channel / is better than others / because the newsreader knows / what is going on in the world, / and is more reliable and trustworthy.

- a** With newspapers it is possible to flick through the pages, scan the headlines and the introductory paragraphs, read an article on one page and then go back and read another report in a different part of the paper.
- b** The newsreader's job is to introduce the news item and make it possible for a journalist to continue it with film that has been selected.
- c** The limited time for in-depth treatment of stories in the TV news means that TV viewers do not get as much detail as newspaper readers.
- d** Natural-sounding speech helps to create an impression that the newsreader and journalists are having a conversation with each viewer rather than talking to millions of viewers in a million different lounge rooms all at once.

The correct order for sentences is shown below:
 Art in the form of graffiti originated in the late 1960s, though graffiti in the form of words or drawings scratched on walls to express an idea had been around for a long time before then.
 Around that time, the words 'Julio 204' began appearing all around New York city.
 Julio's tag was quickly followed by 'Taki 183' which turned out to be the tag of a young Manhattan man called Demetrius.
 In 1971, the New York Times found and interviewed Taki 183 to try and explain the new phenomenon.
 Within a year of the article on Taki 183 appearing, hundreds of new writers emerged and took New York City by storm.

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Understanding main ideas

- i** 2 Your skin is waterproof.
ii 1 Your skin is an all-purpose covering.
iii 4 Your insides need to be kept moist so that they don't stop working.
iv 3 Skin keeps water out, and more importantly, it keeps water in.
- i** 1 Our faces are windows into our thoughts and feelings.
ii 2 Something in our faces signals whether, for example, we are lying or not.
iii 4 The psychologist travelled the world looking at faces in all kinds of culture.
iv 3 One US psychologist set out to discover the rules that govern how we interpret facial expressions.
- a** 2 This is not surprising given that when we are frightened or upset our heart starts thumping.
b 5 Today we know that the heart is just a muscular pump for the blood.
c 4 But the belief turned out to be wrong.
d 1 In the past, people used to think that the heart controlled the whole body including feelings and emotions.
e 7 What is more, we know that the whole body is controlled by this amazing organ.
f 3 This old belief gave rise to phrases like 'I know it in my heart'.
g 6 We know that the heart is in fact controlled by the brain.
- a** 4 Two in three, for example, would talk to their mothers about failing exams whereas one in three would talk to their fathers.
b 1 A recent study of Australian youth has some good news for mothers around the country.
c 5 And more than half would tell mum if they were worried about something while only one-quarter would tell dad.
d 3 Mothers were nominated more than twice as often as fathers overall as the person they would talk to.
e 2 The survey of 400 young people between 8 and 15 showed that young people think that mothers are better than fathers to talk to about most topics.

Missing words shown in italics:

Laughter is part of human *behaviour* all over the world, yet it not very well *understood*. We laugh for a variety of *reasons*, not only because we find something *funny/humorous*. One recent study set out to discover how we develop our sense of humour, and expected to find that it was to do with our *genes* not our upbringing. The study tested the responses of fraternal and *identical* twins to a set of cartoons. They found that twins in *both* groups tended to have similar views as their siblings about what was funny. The interesting thing was that the *identical* twins were no more likely to agree than the *fraternal* twins. This suggests that shared genes played no part but shared *upbringing* did. The surprising results might explain the cultural *differences* in senses of humour.

a i S **ii** M **iii** S **iv** S **v** M **vi** S **vii** M **viii** S **ix** S **x** M

b Main idea best expressed by **x**. The title including the word 'epidemic' reflects the important point that kissing is on the increase. The whole text, including all the other main points, builds up to this important one.

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Understanding detail

- a** therefore, because of this **b** information about religion and government
c hieroglyphics **d** Egyptian scribes
- a** true records **b** accurate **c** records of historical events or the actions or rulers not being accurate
a 4th century AD **b** July 1799 **c** a French soldier **d** He was at a French fort established by Napoleon's army. **e** three **f** Greek **g** One of the scripts looked like hieroglyphics, and another was in Greek. They thought this might help to discover what the hieroglyphics meant. **h** The Rosetta Stone

i to honour the Egyptian Pharaoh of the time. **j** The benefits the Pharaoh had given to Egypt. **k** about 20 years
l A Frenchman, Jean-Francois Champollion, 14 years. **m** Thomas Young's

4 The questions about the most important ideas are probably: **g, h, i, l.**

5 **a** makes us less stressed, lowers our blood pressure, reduces anxiety

b any examples from paragraph 2 **c** keep conversations going, make people feel part of a group

d our sense of humour had more to do with our genes than our upbringing **e** by our genes **f** 56

g Gary Larson's **h** True **i** True

8 Understanding complex sentences

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1 Main clauses are shown below:

a Radio can report on events **b** radio can often be first with the news. **c** Radio can abandon all its other programs **d** In bushfire disasters, radio informs people about the location of fires **e** almost every radio station in the country incorporates a talkback segment

2 Sentence subjects are shown below:

a programs **b** programs **c** stories **d** example **e** competition **f** programs

3 Possible answers:

a With newspapers / it is possible / to flick through the pages, / scan the headlines / and the introductory paragraphs, / read an article on one page / and then go back / and read another report / in a different part of the paper.

b The newsreader's job / is to introduce the news item / and make it possible / for a journalist / to continue it with film / that has been selected.

c The limited time for in-depth treatment of stories in the TV news / means that TV viewers / do not get as much detail / as newspaper readers.

d Natural-sounding speech / helps to create an impression / that the newsreader and journalists / are having a conversation with each viewer / rather than talking to millions of viewers / in a million different lounge rooms / all at once

9 Understanding graphs and tables

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1 **a** 1999 and 2001 **b** No **c** 88% **d** more, 21%; **e** the number of 10-17 year olds who had an email address in 2001 **f** 4% **g** increase **h** your own answer

2 **a** 13 including 'other' **b** what teenagers use the internet for and what they use it for most **c** as a study resource **d** for news and weather **e** 30% **f** 14% **g** 45% **h** true **i** your own answer.

3 **a** true **b** not clear **c** true **d** soccer and skateboarding **e** soccer **f** 28% **g** increase **h** either that girls don't play as much sport as boys, or that there is no one single girls' sport that has as many participants as these four boys' sports **i** your own answer

4 **a** Soccer **b** 19.6% **c** netball **d** 18.2% **e** yes (2500) **f** yes (6400) **g** athletics **h** the number of boys and girls who played Australian Rules football **i** the results differ in that firstly the table includes popular girls' sports such as netball; secondly, the table shows that Australian Rules football, tennis, swimming and basketball are more popular boys sports than Rugby League **j** These results might differ because firstly, the research which led to the first graph might not have included girls; secondly, the graph research may not have included question about these sports, and it might have been done mainly in areas where Rugby League was the main football game.

10 Inferring

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1 **a** Jacko and Toby

b perhaps a few weeks — long enough for Jacko's growl to be familiar but not long enough to considered a permanent home — he and Toby are sleeping on mattresses **c** grumpy, angry, discontent — the words *heavy footsteps*, *a shouting of voices*, the *growl* and *slammed shut*.

d usual because the growl is familiar to Michael

e an uncared for, bare room in a house or flat — the words *the bare boards of the hallway*, *the thin blanket*, *cracked glass*, *curtainless window*, *mattress*

f He is probably in trouble of some kind, perhaps he has been thrown out of home, perhaps he is hiding from someone, e.g. the police, a gang member.